Friday, March 14th, 2025

The Leprechaun and the Four-Leaf Clover:
Wealth Real & Illusory in the Iconography of Irish-American Consumerism

It's easy to dismiss both the leprechaun and the four-leaf clover as simple marketing ploys to prey upon the spending habits of various target markets including parents, who want their children to enjoy the pagan symbols of St. Patrick's Day as merely a bit of imaginary fun, gamblers, who are in desperate need of luck as they spin a slot machine or scratch a lottery ticket, girls, who no longer sincerely believe in luck or magic, but get to relive some of their childhood happiness in having a cute green drink, or anyone who is simply looking for a reason to indulge in yet another round of festivities between Valentine's Day and Easter,[1] but the truth is that these icons have only apparently been perpetuated for their marketing potential: the leprechaun and the four-leaf clover have great symbolic wisdom, and act as counterpoles to a complete understanding of luck and luxury.

The leprechaun is a finely dressed jovial little man, whose promises of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow are obviously false, but tempting to believe. He acts quite similarly to the will-o'-the-wisp figure, leading those unaware of his tricks through a dark and dangerous wood that's dressed in a sort of springtime mania, not by an unearthly light, but instead by a silly little laugh, which, when properly heard, is much more like a cackle than a giggle. There are many such leprechauns running around our cities today, as they always have—the particular garments they use to display their wealth have changed, but their promises are as empty as ever. To see a leprechaun, that is, someone embodying the icon of the leprechaun, is lucky, for seeing him as what he is will allow you to more easily avoid his tricks (the empty words and laugher), but to see a leprechaun, unaware that he is a leprechaun, is intensely inauspicious, and opens you up to his deception: he will make you laugh, and laugh, and laugh, but he only does this to lure you into a state of vulnerability, which he will then use to tempt you into perpetually chasing him, and he is well aware that the more scarce he makes himself, the farther you will run: but, remember, the rainbow only ends in heaven.

His imaginary pot of gold could be literal opulence—he could easily be wearing all he owns, and trick you into believing he has much more, or elsewise, the pot of gold could be anything he believes you might want: fame, power, status, or, worst of all, true love.[2] Because the pot of gold never

[1] May these portraits be taken without condescension, for I've been all of these, save the parent—my grandmotherly wisdom was given, not earned.

[2] It's worth noting that these 'leprechauns' (real people) are only very rarely as sinister as I'm making them seem (though devils do exist among us): quite often they are simply insecure men who feel they need to tempt

existed, it's forever flexible, and so he can easily shift around the specifics of what he's tempting you with according to what he believes you might be tempted by. The only true luxury he has is his laughter, and there is no danger inherent in sharing in his merriment whenever he might be around, but, do be sure that when he stands, you stay seated, and, as with all indulgences, do not become attached.[3]

Exactly the opposite, the four-leaf clover is a symbol of purity, good fortune, and true luxury, but it is slightly backwards and improper to treat it as a symbol at all, for it actually exists here within the world: four-leaf clovers can be used as icons, but they have literal existence as well: they are truly out there in the clover patches, not as abstractions, but as themselves.

Where the leprechaun asks us to laugh along with him, and in so doing, ensnares us within a heavily barbed bush, the four-leaf clover asks nothing of us. The experience of running one's fingers through a clover patch under the light of the sun is itself a luxury, but one that teaches virtues, in particular, patience and faith: patience, in that a four-leaf clover never immediately reveals itself to us, but instead rests among its dear friends, humble in its rarity, where the leprechaun is instead flashy and vain, and faith, in that the quest for the four-leaf clover will eventually conclude in one being found.[4] To even have an afternoon free of obligation where it's possible to crouch among the grasses and the weeds is so very expensive and rare and yet also completely free, and the experience is one of interacting with reality rather than the abstractions of words, where deception is nearly inherent, and it's easy to become lost.[5] But then again, these too are words, though when I frolic, everything goes so quiet around me, and I should think it'd be just the same for you.

to even look is to be lucky

For Mary Ellen McLaughlin,

Ar dheis Dé go Raibh a hAnam

Forever your granddaughter,

Eliza

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others with something imaginary out of a lack of self-confidence and self-worth. In such a case they are merely pitiable, though they can still cause great harm.

[3] Most fairy tale wisdom eventually leads to the common truth that appearances can be deceiving, and the fable of the leprechaun is no exception.

[4] Cliche as it is, one often finds oneself on such a quest, which is worth putting in opposition to the chase after the leprechaun, where so many lose themselves.

[5] touch grass, etc. etc.